

The Last Safe House: A Story of the Underground Railroad written by Barbara Greenwood and illustrated by Heather Collins, 1998 and published by Kids Can Press. Available from the Castlegar Public Library. Reviewed by Robert M. Macrae, Integrated Environmental Planning Technology Instructor, Selkirk College.

I'm always looking for books to read to my children, books that will engage interest and thought. "The Last Safe House: A Story of the Underground Railroad" is such a book. It's a story of a fictional family in St. Catharines, Canada West (now Ontario) who in 1856 helped a black family escaping from slavery in Virginia via the Underground Railroad. This historic, juvenile fiction is well constructed. Greenwood based her work on references like Daniel G. Hill's history of the lives of escaped slaves, "The Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada", 1981, and Benjamin Drew's "The Narratives of Fugitives Slaves in Canada", 1856. Her references provide a list of further readings, and they suggest Greenwood's commitment to historic facts.

The story is about a relationship between two eleven year-old girls. Johanna lives with her parents and brother in the contemporary comfort afforded by a father running a cooperage. Eliza's father has been sold downstream to the hard, short life of slaves who work the cotton plantations of Mississippi. Eliza grows up as a house slave under the aegis of her mother and learns to cook, clean, sew, wash and iron. She also learns the sting of her master's whip. Her mother flees the plantation with her children after overhearing the master discuss selling Eliza and her brother. The girls meet in the cooperage - a safe house not entirely free from marauding slave catchers. Johanna discovers that some of her worries are trivial and some of her friends are shallow.

This was a good book to read aloud and discuss with children. What set this book apart is that it is interspersed with brief historic articles on topics such as how slaves were captured in Africa and transported to America, slave life on plantations, slavery in Canada, the Underground Railroad, slave catchers, and real characters like Harriet Tubman. Tubman was an escaped slave who returned to the US and led over 300 fugitives to freedom even though there was a \$40,000 reward for her capture. The detailed illustrations and maps also draw the attention of children.

If you decide to read this book to your children, be prepared to answer probing questions. My seven year old son asked incredulously, "Did they sell people because they were black?"

The idea of people as property affected both of my children. They were piqued when I read, "Eliza and her brother were young with many years of hard work in them and therefore they were valuable property if captured alive," and "their mother was a skilled seamstress and cook who could be sold for \$1,000 or hired out to earn money for her owner. The owner might post rewards of \$500 for each one - a strong temptation back when \$400 was a year's salary for a teacher."

My twelve year old daughter asked, "Why didn't plantation owners treat their slaves better; pay them fairly to avoid escapes and the expense of hiring slave catchers?"

She asked, "Why didn't plantation owners share their money fairly?"

And she asked, "Why did some Canadians not want to be seen in public places talking to black people?"

Why indeed? We are no longer in the nineteenth century, but we continue to talk about racism, property owners' and workers' rights, manufacturers relocating to Mexico or Asia, the cost to insure that our clothes aren't made by children or child slaves, sweat shops, do toy makers get paid fairly, and when benefits such as universal health care and employment standards didn't exist.

If you're uncomfortable exposing your children to these issues, there are always Seinfeld reruns.